DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 081 CE 080 088

AUTHOR Weigand, Kathy
TITLE Adult Learners and Distance Education Evaluation: Implications for Success.
PUB DATE 2000-00-00
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Programs; *Adult Students; Audiovisual Instruction; *College Programs; *Distance Education; Educational Television; Higher Education; Program Effectiveness; *Student Attitudes; Student Motivation; *Telecourses; Television Teachers
IDENTIFIERS *Barry University FL

ABSTRACT

The telecourse education program created by Barry University in Florida was evaluated by use of a questionnaire designed to measure students' overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the telecourse process. The questionnaire contains questions about how students heard about the telecourses, whether services were accommodating, what they liked most and least about the process, their motivation, their feelings about the onsite sessions, whether they will register for another telecourse, and future courses they would like to see delivered. Evaluation questionnaires were sent to students' homes after the end of each course, with assurance of anonymity. Some of the findings were the following: (1) student motivation for taking telecourses included saving time, transportation problems, disabilities, trying something new, and preferring this method of learning; (2) advantages of taking telecourses were setting one's own schedule, flexibility, ability to repeat viewing of tapes, more time to write notes and assimilate information, guest speakers, and no need to travel; and (3) disadvantages included that it is easy for students to get behind, testing, the classes take more time and require more work than regular classes, and missing interaction with other students. The evaluation concluded that the students are highly enthusiastic about telecourses and excited about this new method of course delivery. The university plans to continue to listen to its students through the evaluation process in order to continue to develop the program successfully. (Contains 19 references.) (KC)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
K Weigand
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Adult Learners and Distance Education Evaluation: Implications for Success

Kathy Weigand, M.Ed.
Academic Advisor/Administrative Coordinator Telecourse Program
Barry University, Miami Shores, Florida

ED 441 081

Introduction

Barry University is an independent, coeducational Catholic institution of higher education, which fosters academic distinction in liberal arts and professional studies within the Judeo-Christian and Dominican tradition. Founded in 1940, the University is sponsored by the Dominican Sisters of Adrian, Michigan.

The School of Adult and Continuing Education offers accelerated degree programs to adult learners with class offerings in the evenings and Saturdays. In addition, the School awards up to thirty credits for prior college-level learning attained outside a formal institutional setting. Currently, this program is offered in fourteen sites throughout Florida.

Recent acquisition of a local public television station has permitted us to offer telecourses as a distance learning component to our accelerated adult degree programs in eight sites over a five-county area. In addition to the public television station, Barry University also owns the full-service David Brinkley Television Studio. Our Division of Instructional Technology deserves credit for their considerable expertise in producing our high quality, professional telecourses.

Barry University's distance program has been a valuable contribution in meeting the complex needs of our adult students, thus generating an increase in our program enrollment. The overall success of the first year of this program can be attributed to several factors. However, continuing success in any new program, for students and instructors alike, depends upon a continuous evaluation process. This evaluation process is an integral component to program development and a key to the success of adult distance learning.

This paper addresses the specific telecourse evaluation process utilized for our telecourse program, as well as implications for adult students' success in such a program. While our School offers internet courses as well, this paper addresses only telecourses, although the terms telecourses, distance learning, and distance education are used synonymously.

Evaluation

Adult education is a leader among other fields in the use of a consumer perspective. Evaluation and examination of adult programs often concerns qualities important to a consumer--value for time and money invested, the amount of help received, whether the program was stimulating, and whether participating was pleasant (Steele, 1989).

Shortly after our telecourse program began in July of 1998, an evaluation questionnaire was designed to measure the student's overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction

CE 080 042

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

with the telecourse process, a "reflection on experience." Probably the evaluative activity most important to the program participant, teacher, and program coordinator is reflection on experience (Schon, 1987). This is the way most people evaluate what they have given and what they have received from a program; it captures the extent to which they value the experience they have had (Steele, 1989).

These evaluation questionnaires are typically sent to the students' homes after the end of each course, to be completed at the students' convenience. Anonymity is assured. The evaluation questionnaires are coded only for gender and demographic data. Properly and thoroughly completed, the evaluation provides feedback to all individuals engaged in the telecourses. This procedure is to be viewed as a cyclical process, allowing summative and formative decisions to be made and providing data for future refinement (Kowalski, 1988).

While we also use a standard course/instructor evaluation during the term, this specific evaluation was designed as a means of assessing the students' impressions of the distance education experience in and of itself, and to provide valuable contributions toward continuing program development. Houle (1972) stressed that in interpreting and using evaluation data, both the successes and failures of the program should be examined. In addition, this evaluation process will also be used to compare learning outcomes for students who are enrolled in the same course in a traditional manner.

The telecourse evaluation asks the student whether or not this was their first experience with telecourses; how they heard about the telecourse program; whether or not they found support services accommodating; what they liked most and least about the process; whether they were satisfied with their advising; whether they were satisfied with testing procedures; whether they had any difficulty with the broadcast reception; what their motivation was for taking a telecourse; what their feelings were about the onsite sessions--how they could be more productive or beneficial; whether or not they will register for another telecourse; and future courses they would like to see delivered through this method. Space is made available after each question for additional comments.

Thoughtfully selected evaluation questions have provided us with adult students' thorough and detailed responses, which have been of considerable value to us in planning, marketing, orientation, advising, instruction, testing, course offerings, and overall administration of this new program.

Student Readiness for Distance Learning

As student advisors, we feel we know our students' academic ability well enough to ascertain whether or not they will be good candidates for telecourses. Understanding adults as learners and how to respond to their diversity and variability is essential (Galbraith, 1990). We ask our newly enrolled students at the time of registration whether or not they have ever taken a distance education course, and we ask this question again later, on the evaluation questionnaire, to assess how many students have previously taken a course through this method. Understanding who adults are as learners, what changes adults go through as they age, what motivates adults to seek learning experiences, and how adults accommodate the role of learner in addition to their other

life roles is crucial to designing meaningful education programs and facilitating learning that takes place (Merriam & Cunningham, 1989).

Students are given a telecourse handbook at the time of registration. This handbook includes a brief self-evaluation summary, which assesses suitable criteria for successful telecourse completion. Questions are asked relating to self-motivation, independent learning, discipline, time management, organization, study habits, reading comprehension, exam taking, procrastination, tenacity, and responsibility for learning. Students' positive responses indicate a strong sense of self-directed learning potential, thus ensuring a measure of successful completion of the telecourse.

A highly successful self-directed learner is described as exhibiting initiative, independence, and persistence in learning; one who accepts responsibility for his or her own learning and views problems as challenges, not obstacles; one who is capable of self-discipline and has a high degree of curiosity; one who has a strong desire to learn or change and is self confident; one who is able to use basic study skills, organize his or her own time, set an appropriate pace for learning, and develop a plan for completing work; one who enjoys learning and has a tendency to be goal oriented (Guglielmino, 1977). Not all students fit into these categories for self-directed learners, however. Claims that adults are innately self-directed, or inherently critical thinkers, cannot be empirically supported (Brookfield, 1992). Occasionally, a student will take a telecourse only to comment after that they realize the need for structure that a classroom provides.

Since the majority of our students have been away from the classroom for many years, it is important for them to learn how to study and learn again. A new or returning student is generally advised to take a traditional classroom course their first term. Obviously, this leads to increased opportunities to participate in more self-directed activities before entering a completely self-directed course, making it more of an adaptive process. Not all students, however, need the structure of a classroom and may do very well in a telecourse as their first back-to-school experience. Telecourses foster students to diagnose and develop their personal learning needs and formulate learning objectives.

Adult students tend to be quite proactive in their educational choices. They have a genuine interest in what they learn and how they learn, since their participation is voluntary. It is important to involve the adult learner in a mutual planning of methods and curriculum and in diagnosing their personal learning needs. As advisers, we encourage our adult students to formulate their learning objectives, to identify resources, and to devise strategies for using such resources to accomplish their objectives. We help our students ultimately carry out their learning plans and involve them in evaluating their learning (Galbraith, 1990). Distance learning provides the adult student and advisor with an alternative learning method to consider as part of their overall educational objective.

Student Support Services

Support services must promote academic progress and, hopefully, the development of the learner. The academic advisor plays a very important role in fostering self-direction and student development (Kok & Brown, 1998). One important feature of our adult student program at Barry University is our personal advising relationship with our students. Our friendly, open door policy is most often listed as one of the factors to which our students owe their success, and referrals are most often based

primarily on this single issue. As program advisors and directors, we pride ourselves on this "personalization." We take time to work with our students to help them define and achieve their educational objectives. Thus, with the onset of the telecourse program, we found it necessary to establish new policies and practices which would continue to provide this personal attention for our distance learning students.

The evaluation questionnaire was the first method initiated to monitor students' feelings about this new method of course delivery, and to help us determine if we needed to adapt our advising methods to suit their changing needs. In addition to the questionnaire, a number of other support services have been instituted with the new telecourse program.

Newsletter – A student newsletter is generated each term to provide students with new telecourse information, important dates, announcements, program and/or policy changes, and other helpful registration and enrollment data.

Handbook – A telecourse handbook is given to students to review at the time of course registration. This handbook contains a brief introduction to telecourses and what to expect, along with a self-evaluation, "Are telecourses for you?" It outlines benefits for students, important facts about telecourses, instructions for the mandatory onsite sessions, where to get course materials, library resource information, cable conversion guide, testing procedures, off-campus site contacts, registration and tuition information, and detailed information on the specific telecourses available that term. A television airing schedule is also provided to the student at the first onsite session. Students are responsible for watching or taping the telecourses. They are made aware that if they miss a scheduled broadcast, a complete set of all course tapes is available at the off-campus sites.

Website – A distance education website provides links to all distance education instructors and their respective courses each term. General distance education information is provided, as well as online resources, and current technological and distance education articles. A brainstorming area is provided where students' ideas can be exchanged with instructors and other students.

Focus on adequate student support as an essential element of learning may be one of the most distinctive features of quality control in distance learning environments (Phipps, Wellman, & Merisotis, 1998).

Motivation

My work demands too much of my time for regular classes; I have transportation problems and cannot get to a regular class; I have a disability which keeps me home much of the time; I prefer this method of learning; I thought it would be less demanding; I wanted to try something new; I prefer to structure my own learning schedule; I am a single parent and need more time with my children.

Most psychologists use the word motivation to describe those processes that can energize behavior and give direction or purpose to behavior. Adults are adaptable and highly motivated to complete their education in a timely manner. Motivation can be unstable, however, when one looks at the adult's world as filled with competitors for attention and effort. Family, friends, job, and the rest of many attractions and necessities of any adult's life all compete with education for time and involvement (Wlodkowski, 1990).

As long ago as 1926, Lindeman wrote that individual differences among people increase with age; therefore, adult education must make optimal provision for differences in style, time, place, and pace of learning (Lindeman, 1926). Adult students are often under pressure to get a degree due to external expectations (fulfill expectations or recommendations of their employer), or for personal advancement (to achieve higher status in their job, secure professional advancement, and stay abreast of competitors). Telecourses provide a means by which they can accelerate this process at their own pace and continue to effectively maintain their work, home, family, and other responsibilities.

Convenience and independent learning is by far the number one reason students take our telecourses. Other factors mentioned often include job and family responsibilities, transportation problems, and health or disability factors. For some students, telecourses allow the opportunity to earn more credits each term. This is particularly true in the case of our students receiving financial aid. They must maintain a full time enrollment status. By adding a telecourse or two to their schedule, this balance allows them more time to devote to family or career responsibilities.

Since these telecourses are available to all of our adult students as elective courses, we often enroll a nursing or education major who is enrolled in a full time program during the day and finds this delivery method is their only option in taking certain prerequisite courses.

Advantages

I don't have to attend weekly class; I can set my own schedule; It is very flexible; I can view tapes over and over; I can work in the comfort of my own home; I have more time to assimilate information; The tapes give us guest speakers each week; I like the uninterrupted lectures; I can stop and pause to write; I can share my class with my family; I don't have to travel so far to class.

Our evaluation responses indicate there are a number of advantages to telecourses, particularly to adult students who are trying to balance a career, family and education. A traditional degree program is often impossible to complete for these students. Our evening/weekend adult degree program, in conjunction with telecourses, offers adults the opportunity to achieve their educational goals in an accelerated manner.

The majority of our students cite flexibility and convenience as the major advantage to taking courses in this manner. Other advantages mentioned are the preference for independent study; uninterrupted lecture formats; more time to assimilate information; infrequent onsite sessions, which minimize travel; opportunity to spend more time with family; the ability to stop, pause and write during the taped lectures;

being able to share tapes with family and friends; and having the tapes to watch for review.

Eighty percent (80%) of our telecourse students this first year have been female. Distance education can be seen as having a potentially important contribution in overcoming barriers to women's participation in education, and has a very important role in women's development. Women, in particular, have constraints of time, space, resources, and socio-economic disabilities. Telecourses can help by enabling them to learn and earn at their own pace, as well as fulfilling family responsibilities (Evans, 1995).

There may even be some learning outcomes that are more readily achieved in a distance learning environment than in a traditional classroom. Adult skill learning can be facilitated when individual learners assess their own skills and strategies to discover inadequacies or limitations for themselves (Brundage & MacKeracher, 1980) , which often occurs in distance learning. Distance courses may better support students in developing and honing certain such as self-directed learning, teamwork, and problem solving skills (Levenburg & Major, 1998). Students maintain a greater degree of control over their study processes--they can select approaches consistent with their individual learning styles. By removing time pressures, distance learning encourages reflective thinking. It stimulates creativity by removing perceived pressures from the peer group, and perhaps by the presence of the instructor, that may inhibit certain students from taking risks in the classroom (Moore, 1990).

By removing artificial boundaries of time and space of the defined, sometimes rigid, "traditional" classroom, distance education can even enhance the ability to communicate, which is actually the foundation of any educational experience (Shoemaker, 1998).

Disadvantages

It's easy to get behind; Two tests aren't enough to test our knowledge since there is so much information; More frequent, shorter tests would help organize and structure the material better; They are a lot more work and take more time than a regular class; I miss the interaction with other students and the instructor; I never had a chance to connect with my classmates.

Despite the advantages of distance education, various obstacles still prevent many adult learners from participating.

Learning at a distance is a difficult undertaking that requires considerable self-discipline and determination (Shoemaker, 1998). Just as students and faculty find many advantages to this delivery method, of course, there are also disadvantages. One drawback is that students find the distance programs often require more homework than a traditional class. They often enroll in such a course thinking it will require less work and less time, only to find out that they are spending more time with research and independent assignments.

A few students mentioned that they found it easy to procrastinate, subsequently finding themselves too far behind to catch up with the class. Self-discipline cannot be emphasized enough as being a key element in a student's distance education success. For

some students, it was difficult to stay on track without the structure of a traditional classroom and weekly lectures.

Another perceived drawback for students is the lack of interaction with the instructor and fellow classmates. This feeling of isolation prevents the student from knowing how they are progressing academically in a telecourse. They may be unsure of themselves and their learning. Some of our distance instructors have alleviated this somewhat by requiring weekly quizzes, which allows the students to monitor their learning progress. Appropriate support and feedback are required in an educational transaction to counteract one of the major complaints of [distance students]—the sense of isolation and need for affiliation (Persons & Catchpole, 1987). Chat rooms or regular email or telephone communication can also alleviate this lack of weekly interaction. However, in a telecourse, unlike other distance learning methods, computer access is not necessarily a requirement, only strongly recommended as a successful distance learning tool.

Fortunately, most of our students state that this lack of interaction is a small price to pay for the overall convenience afforded by this method of instruction. Unlike traditional students who often require the socialization a classroom format and campus atmosphere provides, adult learners have moved beyond this need with the many other activities their lives provide.

Summary

Our students are consumers--the evolving evaluation process asks them whether their education was commensurate with their investment, whether they received help when necessary, whether they were stimulated by the program, and whether they enjoyed participating--all factors which contribute to ongoing success and growth.

Overall, our students have been highly enthusiastic about telecourses and distance learning throughout the first year of the program. Our evaluation process clearly indicates that students are excited about this new method of course delivery.

Adult learners must be active participants in the evaluation process in order to maintain their commitment and retention. It is important to review program goals and objectives periodically with the students and to obtain their feedback. As a result of this, modifications may be necessary. This builds a climate of mutual respect and trust, collaboration, support, and authenticity for the educational process and for all involved (Galbraith, 1990).

By continuing to listen to our students through the evaluation process, we are confident that our program will continue to develop successfully. "Like guides, we walk at times ahead of our students, at times beside them, and at times, we follow their lead." (Daloz, (1986, p.237).

References

Brookfield, S. (1992). Why can't I get this right? Myths and realities in facilitating adult learning. Adult Learning, 3(6), 12-15.

Brundage, D., & MacKeracher, D. (1980). Adult learning principles and their application to program planning. Toronto: The Minister of Education.

Daloz, L.A. (1986). Effective teaching and mentoring. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Evans, K. (1995). The commonwealth of learning: Barriers to participation of women in technological education and the role of distance learning. [Online]. Available: http://www.col.org/O/html/barriers.htm#Barriers [1995, November].

Galbraith, M.W. (1990). Attributes and skills of an adult educator. In M. W. Galbraith (Ed.), Adult Learning Methods, (pp. 3-22). Malabar, FL: Krieger.

Guglielmino, L.M. (1977). Development of the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia, 1977). Dissertation Abstracts International, 386467-A (University Microfilms No. 7806004).

Houle, C.O. (1972). The design of education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kok, K., & Brown, R. (1998). Isolation and belonging in a distance community. [Online]. Available: http://www.ahea.org/Proceedings [July, 1999].

Kowalski, T.J. (1988). The organization and planning of adult education. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Levenburg, N.M., & Major, H.T. (1998). Distance learning: Implications for higher education in the 21st century. [Online]. Available: http://www.horizon.unc.edu/TS/commentary/1998-11.asp [May, 1999].

Lindeman, E.C. (1926). The meaning of adult education. New York: New Republic.

Merriam, S.B., & Cunningham, P.M. (1989). Adult learners and the educational process. In S. B. Merriam & P. M. Cunningham (Eds.), Handbook of adult and continuing education, (pp. 181-182). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Moore, M.G. (1990). Correspondence study. In M. W. Galbraith (Ed.), Adult Learning Methods. Malabar, FL: Krieger.

Persons, H., & Catchpole, M. (1987). The addition of audio-teleconferencing to interactive telecourses: An experimental analysis of drop-out rates. Distance Education, 8, 251-258.

Phipps, R.A., Wellman, J.V., & Merisotis, J.P. (1998). Assuring quality in distance learning: A preliminary review. [Online]. Available: http://www.chea.org [May, 1999].

Schon, D.A. (1987). Educating the reflective practitioner. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Shoemaker, C.C. (1998). Leadership in continuing and distance education in higher education. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Steele, S. (1989). The evaluation of adult and continuing education. In S. B. Merriam and P. M. Cunningham, Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989.

Wlodkowski, R.L. (1990). Strategies to enhance adult motivation to learn. In M. W. Galbraith (Ed.), Adult Learning Methods. Malabar, FL: Krieger.